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## DMV converts from embossed to digitized license plates



Retiring Division of Motor Vehicles Commissioner Joe Miller displays one of the flat license plates expected to become West Virginia's standard. The plates are easier to read and are less expensive to produce.

by George Hohmann  
Daily Mail Business Editor

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - You've probably noticed those "Friends of Coal" license plates. They look odd, and it's not just because they have a black background.

It's also because the letters and numbers are flat, not embossed. A closer inspection reveals more differences: the plates are more reflective, and they are on a thinner sheet of aluminum.

The state Division of Motor Vehicles began issuing "Friends of Coal" plates in May 2011. Three months ago Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin unveiled the state's second flat plate. It celebrates West Virginia's 150 years of statehood.

Although the "Friends of Coal" plate and many other specialty plates cost extra, the sesquicentennial plate is available at no additional charge. Customers can exchange their current plate at any DMV regional office or by mail at the time of renewal or at any other time at a pro-rated fee.

Joe Miller said flat plates, which feature a digitized design, will soon become the standard for all plates issued by West Virginia. Miller retired as DMV commissioner last week.

Digitized plates have several advantages over embossed plates. For one thing, they are significantly more legible.

Miller said state and Charleston police were invited to DMV headquarters in Kanawha City to see how digitized plates compared with embossed plates in a variety of light conditions and at numerous distances. "The embossed plate sort of exploded," Miller said. "The flat plate kept the numbers so you could read them very clearly."

Digitized plates also save money. The first letter or number on flat plates will not indicate the month a plate expires. That will be indicated on the decal. And the color of the decal will indicate the expiration year.

DMV Acting Commissioner Steve Dale said, "West Virginia is unique in using that first letter or number system for identifying the expiration month." When the system was established in the 1960s, "it was supposed to be a nice indicator to people of when the plate expires although my experience is most people don't pick up on that," he said.

"The second thing was, it's a quick indicator for law enforcement because they can say, 'All plates that start with 2 should have a certain color decal.'"

Because of that system, "Now in each office, for the standard-issue Class A license plate, we have to maintain 12 different quantities," Dale said. "Right now we're renewing plates with the number '2.' So we have a big supply of plates with '2.' But we have to maintain supplies of other months because customers come to get plates that expire in other months for a variety of reasons - they may have had their plate stolen or they may have bought a new car and want to replace their existing plate because it has faded.

"When we go all-digital, we'll have a supply of generic plates in each office that won't be keyed to a particular month," he said. "When those plates are issued they'll be customized with the appropriate decal that indicates the month and year of expiration."

Embossed plates are printed using large pre-printed vinyl rolls that contain the plates' graphic design. "For Class A licenses, there are 1,800 images to a roll," Dale said.

Plates are made by West Virginia Correctional Industries at Mt. Olive.

"They only have two or three big machines that can put the vinyl on the plate and emboss them with the numbers," Dale said. "So if we say we need 1,000 veterans' plates, they have to take the roll they have off and place the veterans' graphic on. It's very labor intensive."

Miller said that to be economical, the DMV has to order 10,000 to 15,000 embossed plates at a time.

But digital plates can be economically printed one at a time. Dale compared the process to using a desktop printer. "Now we normally have a six-month supply of Class A plates in stock," he said. "We can reduce quantities - it'll be more like just-in-time delivery."

The way digital plates are made also is more environmentally friendly.

"With the new system, you eliminate the painting of the plates," Dale said. "You also eliminate having to send them through big ovens to cure the paint." That means there aren't any leftover solvents and the cost of energy is reduced.

Digital plates are on a thinner sheet of aluminum, which means the blanks cost less. Because they weigh less, "they will slightly reduce our mailing cost, which is based on weight," Dale said. And flat plates take up about 40 percent less storage space.

The two flat plate designs currently offered are made with technology supplied by 3M, the state's vendor. A new state contract for plate technology and automated inventory management is about to go out for bid.

Miller said digital plates and related efficiencies should save the state at least \$600,000 per year.

"We're not the first state to do this," Dale said. "Ohio has gone to digital plates. I believe Maryland is getting into it. Virginia is probably on the verge, like we are. It is the wave of the future."

Miller pointed out that the decals can be printed using a small machine.

Dale said, "We can custom print them at the point of sale, which also goes on to the possibility of doing renewals at kiosks because we'll have the technology in place to produce the stickers."

Contact writer George Hohmann at [busin...@dailymail.com](mailto:busin...@dailymail.com) or 304-348-4836.